

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Summer Camps in Alaska

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Introduction

Appreciation and stewardship of our natural world by young people is best achieved by providing kids with enjoyable outdoor experiences. The National Wildlife Refuges of Alaska offer a variety of summer adventures for young folks throughout the state. Goals, outcomes, planning strategies, target audiences and success often vary from camp to camp. The immense size of the state causes logistical and “marketing” roadblocks; however, the Alaska Refuges partner and coordinate with other organizations and agencies to provide unequalled educational opportunities for kids. The following camps are a small sample of those sponsored in part by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska.

Spirit of Becharof

The *Spirit of Becharof* is sponsored by the Alaska Peninsula/Becharof NWR Complex headquartered in King Salmon, AK. It’s goals are to integrate science and traditional knowledge, to promote individual growth through outdoor experiences, and to cultivate responsible stewardship. This 5-day residential camp is held at a privately owned Youth Camp facility on the north shore of Alaska’s second largest lake, Becharof. It is about 35 miles from King Salmon by small aircraft.

Juniors and seniors from area schools are the target audience. Held in early September, this camp provides students with an alternative to “regular” school for the week. Participants are selected through a competitive application process. A maximum of 15 students are chosen to attend.

Some of the subject areas covered include aquatic biology, fisheries, bear, bird and caribou biology, tundra plants, map reading and orienteering, and Native survival skills. All camp activities attempt to integrate western science methodology with the traditional native way of knowing and managing natural resources.

The *Spirit of Becharof* is possible through the efforts and contributions of staff members and partners including USGS Alaska Science Center, Bristol Bay School District, Lake and Peninsula School District, Becharof Lake Youth Camp, Alaska Audubon Society, Alaska Natural History Association and the Native American Fish & Wildlife Society.

Observing Nature Through Art

Fine Arts is an avenue with which to teach environmental education. In the Tok area schools, there is no formal art education offered. Area young people eagerly take part in any art-related offerings. Tetlin NWR offers an *Observing Nature Through Art* camp to provide an educational and creative service to the kids of the area while introducing them (and their parents) to

opportunities available on the refuge. Initiated in 1996, this camp has benefited over 80 young people ages 10 and up.

Camp goals include: improve youngsters observational skills by providing the opportunity to take the time to look closely; increase appreciation of the natural world through positive outdoor experiences; learn basic art principles and techniques; improve outdoor skills and encourage stewardship.

This camp is held on the Tetlin NWR at the Deadman Lake campground, about 70 miles SE of Tok. Logistics for transportation are simple (road access) and the lake provides opportunities for waterfowl observation, invertebrate studies, canoeing, fishing and swimming. The 3-day/2-night camp is spent in tents at a large group campsite.

Volunteers, paid art instructors and refuge staff immerse the young people in studying the world about them and transferring their discoveries to paper. The emphasis is on observation and discovery; techniques evolve throughout the camp. Journals are encouraged - art and creative writing are blended together. The opportunity to work and share experiences and ideas with professional artists is well utilized by the students.

Costs of this camp are very low. Food, travel and supplies are covered by the Refuge EE program and Alaska Gateway School District. Instructor fees (if any) are paid by the Alaska Natural History Assn.

Earth Quest

Earth Quest is a 10-day residential camp, sponsored by Yukon Flats NWR in Fairbanks, AK. Participants must be 14 – 18 years of age and are selected by an application/interview process throughout Interior Alaska. The maximum number of students is 15. Twin Bears Camp, about 30 miles from Fairbanks is the “base” for *Earth Quest*; it is convenient to Fairbanks, has easy access to a variety of habitats, study areas and field trip sites and is a comfortable, affordable facility for a residential camp.

Earth Quest focuses on career awareness, integration of traditional knowledge and modern science, knowledge of scientific techniques and appreciation of the resource. These goals are accomplished through studies in aquatic biology and fisheries, special visits by Native elders, use of traditional methods, numerous science field trips (such as the University reindeer facility and Alaska Bird Observatory) and hiking and rafting adventures.

Earth Quest is held every-other summer. During the in-between years, Challenge-Cost Share grants allow graduates of *Earth Quest* positions as summer Natural Resource Interns. Since it's beginning in 1995, *Earth Quest* has enjoyed the participation of 90 high school students.

Partners include Tanana Chiefs Conference, Inc., Alaska State Parks and the Alaska Bird Observatory.

Other Summer Camps

In 2003, **Kodiak Science and Salmon Camp** concluded it's 8th season. The camp consists of 8 sessions throughout the summer in remote villages. *Salmon Camp* has been recognized as one of US Fish & Wildlife's top five EE programs nationwide.

The Innoko NWR in McGrath sponsored the 11th annual **Summer Science Camp** this year at it's outdoor classroom facility, which includes a cabin, tent frames and food cache. Activities center around biological research highlighting bears, small mammals and peregrine falcons. Aquatic biology and water quality studies are also stressed. Due to the camps scientific content, 9th and 10th grade participants can earn high school science credit. Outdoor skills such as building emergency shelters add practical skills to the camp.

Togiak NWR conducts 3 camps each summer. The first **Bristol Bay Salmon Camp** was held last year. Students study spawning behavior, analyze stomach contents, and collect anatomical data. Specialists are on hand to discuss fisheries management. At the **Cape Pierce Marine Mammal and Yup'ik Culture Camp** students study marine mammal and seabird biology by helping biologists conduct monitoring and behavioral studies. Traditional knowledge is interwoven throughout the camp. Students participating in the **Nushagak Peninsula Camp** learn about caribou management by conducting aerial radio telemetry to monitor caribou and investigating habitat use. The young people learn traditional uses of caribou, native plants and survival skills. This program helps students gain an understanding of the diversity of the tundra ecosystem.

Alternating summers, **Fire Science and Ornithology** summer "classes", offered by Tetlin NWR in Tok, allow students the opportunity to earn up to 1 high school science credit. Labs, field trips and assisting with refuge fieldwork are part of the credit requirements. The *Fire Science* class includes boreal forest ecology, fire behavior, fire effects, vegetation studies, suppression techniques and equipment, interactive computer simulations, field trips to the Cold Regions Testing Lab permafrost tunnel and Alaska Fire Service and a 3-day raft trip/vegetation analysis on the Fortymile River. The *Ornithology* course includes classes on bird biology, classification, identification, physiology and migration and a 4-day seabird field trip. Since 1996, over 70 students have received high school credit for these classes. Other 2 and 3-day camps provide younger students opportunities for vegetation identification and inventory, animal observation, aquatic biology, water safety and camping etiquette.

Alaska Maritime NWR holds science/culture camps at Sandpoint, St. George and St. Paul. Numerous partners and volunteers make these camps highly successful.

The Koyukuk/Nowitna NWR Complex hosts 2 week-long science camps each summer. In partnership with Galena City Schools and Loudon Village Council, these camps range in focus from insect identification to migratory birds.